



The Untold History of Healing: Plant Lore and Medicinal Magic from the Stone Age to Present

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The Untold History of Healing takes the reader on a exciting, expansive journey of the history of medicine from the Stone Age to modern times, explaining that Western medicine has its true origins in the healing lore of Paleolithic hunters and gatherers, herding nomads, and the early sedentary farmers rather than in the academic tradition of doctors and pharmacists. This absorbing history of medicine takes the reader on a sweeping journey from the Stone Age to modern times, showing that Western medicine has its origins not only in the academic tradition of doctors and pharmacists, but in the healing lore of Paleolithic hunters and gatherers, herding nomads, and the early sedentary farmers. Anthropologist and ethnobotanist Wolf D. Storl vividly describes the many ways that ancient peoples have used the plants in their immediate environment, along with handed-down knowledge and traditions, to treat the variety of ailments they encountered in daily life.

The Untold History of Healing: Plant Lore and Medicinal Magic from the Stone Age to Present Details

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From Reader Review The Untold History of Healing: Plant Lore and Medicinal Magic from the Stone Age to Present for online ebook

Nicholas Brink says

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Until now my reading and interest in medicinal herbs and my teaching and writing about ecstatic or shamanic trance has centered in the hunting and gathering cultures of the Americas. I was drawn to Storl's book because of its reference to Europe, specifically Central and Northern Europe from where my ancestors came. I feel it is about time that I examine my own heritage and this fascinating history of healing did a wonderful job in opening for me this door to Europe as well as validates my understanding of the nature of life upon our one and only Earth. I have come to believe in the power of our Great Mother Earth in her creation of Gaia, of the interdependency of all that is of the Earth, an interdependency that brings health to all living beings upon the Earth. Also as we come closer to the end of life as we know it, Storl's story validates my understanding in what has happened that has brought us to this present point of near term extinction.

The predominate thinking in our current culture is that our "modern mainstream medicine has saved many lives while lessening much suffering. Yet there are more deaths in the hands of physicians than killed by firearms," (p.1). The many other traditional systems of healing from around the world, systems quite divergent from our mainstream medicine, are slowly becoming recognized as effective as our mainstream medicine. These other traditions include Ayurvedic medicine of India, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Japanese Reiki healing, Huna teachings from Hawaii, yoga, massage, Native American shamanism, and tai chi to name a few. Mainstream medicine has its origin in the Greek, Roman and Egyptian ways of healing, whereas in Central Europe the hunter-gatherers, the forest people of the time, knew nothing of these ways but relied upon their knowledge of the natural world, of all life in which they lived. They communed with and listened to the spirits of all that was alive around them. In our present world animal spirit guides are available to us if we call upon them, but the plant spirits seem much farther away and not as present. For us "they need to be awakened and reminded of their power," (p. 209), but their power was very present to the hunter-gatherers, and they are ready to again be present to us too.

From modern research we are learning that "plants are masters of chemical compounds and are living beings that have co-evolved with us and the animals. The world's traditions of folk medicine, of herbs, bark, and roots, have played a primary role in the treatment and care of the sick..."(pg. 25). Initially the forest people used these healing herbs as teas. During the Bronze Age with the development of agriculture and the use of clay to make pots and jugs in which to store grains that would ferment, the brewing of beer using various psychoactive herbs became a major product, yet the brewing of fermented drinks was discovered earlier during the Stone Age. The sap from birch bark was collected and allowed to ferment, one of the first intoxicating drinks. The people found that such fermented drinks to which herbs were added lifted their spirits in intoxication to bring them closer to the spirits of the other world. The pottery brewing containers evolved into the Legend of the Grail. With these and other ancient stories Wolf Storl fulfills my long time love of mythology by making reference to a number of myths of these ancient people.

The ancient Germanic and Celtic creation myth is a story of the world being created out of the interplay of fire and water. For health one must return to the original state of fire and water, fire and water that produced the healing teas they drank. Spoken words, chants, spells and incantations calling upon the spirits of the other world along with healing roots and plants were the substance of healing for the forest people. Juniper was one of the major healing plants.

In considering the Stone Age hunter-gatherers, how were the healing powers of the herbs and roots initially discovered? These forest people learned from observing the instinctual and innate ability of animals to know which healing plants they must go, e.g. rolling in plantain to heal wounds. The hunter-gatherers lived among and were part of the interdependency of all things, part of the evolutionary process. While in a state of trance they would become sensitive to and listened to the spirits of the fauna and flora, their spirit guides. The spirit guides gave them permission as to which animals to hunt and kill just as the Native Americans of the Plains saw plants as powerful beings with each species like a tribe whose spirit chief needed to be asked for permission to harvest one of their tribe.

There were fewer parasites and pathogens and a lack of infectious diseases because of the lower human population. The main diseases of concern included kidney and bladder problems, rheumatism, diarrhea, skin diseases, respiratory problems, wounds from accidents and gynecological problems. The plants most used for these disorders included yarrow, bog rosemary, bearberry, sagebrush, birch and its fungi, fireweed, juniper, knotweed, Labrador tea, marsh marigold, nettles, Artemisia, and winter green. Many of these plants were emetics and purgatives for cleansing and detoxifying the body. It was during this time that sweat lodges also became a popular way of cleansing.

As the glaciers receded the hunter-gatherers became the Neolithic farmers that settled on the fertile soil of the grasslands and lived in small hamlets with longhouses. While living with their domesticated animals the lack of sanitation and hygiene caused the more infectious diseases became a problem. They used stone axes to clear the land to plant wheat, spelt, peas, lentils, millet, beans, and flax. This farm work was much more exhausting with greater wear on the bones. Bone cancer became evident along with degeneration of the spine, bad teeth, food related diseases with their one-sided carbohydrate diet, parasites and worms from the poor sanitation, and diseases transmitted by mice, rats, beetles, fleas, lice and mites. Their span of life decreased.

In 2014 my wife and I visited Ireland, a trip that took us to both the Creevykeel and Carrowmore Burial Cairns. From the archeological research of these burial remains we learned that from the 7000 year old Creevykeel Cairn life expectancy of the hunter-gatherers of that time was about 50 years. To the surprise of many, from the more recent 6000 year old Carrowmore Cairns near Sligo the life expectancy of the farmers of the time was determined to be only 35 years. This fits with my belief that the earlier age of the Great Mother was paradise when the hunter and gatherers lived within the means of what the Earth provided. As we have moved away from the earlier era of the hunter-gatherer the ability to commune with the spirits was left behind, lost to the new belief in rationality. What was considered real was perceived only through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. The life of the Neolithic farmers was much more difficult. With this so called progress into the rational world we were thrown out of the Garden of Eden.

During this time of transition there continued to be hunting and gathering forest people. Among them were the “witches,” the old women of the forest who would collect herbs. Though they were thought of with some apprehension, the farming people continued to go to them because of their magical powers for healing. The herbs collected included chamomile, sow thistle, corn cockle, corn flower, corn poppy, cow wheat, larkspur, colicwort, pimpernel, and shepherd’s purse. (Corn cockle, corn flower and corn poppy must be a more modern name for these plants that existed then because corn only became a crop in Europe after it was discovered with the discovery of the New World.)

The traditional ways of healing in India and in Europe had many similarities such that there appears to be an Indo-European connection. Around 2000 BC the grass and forested steppes of Eurasia became dry such that it could not support the large livestock of the nomads that lived there. These nomads were healthier, stronger and taller than the European farmer. Because of this environmental change they began to leave the steppes, moving both east into what is now India and west into Europe. These warlike people that eventually produced Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan clashed with the farmers. At that time disease was believed to be brought on by a person’s immoral behavior and evil spells, spells that were woven with the magical songs and words of witches and warlocks. To overcome disease the healers needed to recognize these evil spirits and demons through the observation of symptoms. These agents of illness took the form of demons, worms,

magical arrows and elf shots, poisoned drink and food, curses and false words, wrath of the gods and ancestors, and natural causes such as the wounds of accidents and snake bites. The healers needed stronger words so would call upon the gods of fire, the winds, the sun, the morning star and the moon. The moon was called upon as the lord of the water of life, the plant juices, and psychedelic substances that composed their medicinal plant remedies. Storl retells many of the chants and litanies of the healers that were used to destroy these worms and demons. The harvest of the powerful medicinal beings such as elderberry and mistletoe was done with elaborate ceremony with these heavenly plants meeting together and streaming out of council in their power to heal. The outward appearance of plants, i.e. the plants signature, often provided clues as to their medicinal benefits, e.g. a hairy plant for hair growth, and a plant with a milky juice to improve lactation. One doctrine of the time was that “Nature designs a plant so that it emanates what it is good for” (p. 163), and plants were to be approached meditatively to learn of their innermost being. The root of a plant was considered its most powerful part.

In 391 AD the Roman Emperor declared Christianity the state religion, polytheism was banned, and anything pagan destroyed. The pagan gods were labeled the devil and the pagans punished. The healers, usually women, were considered evil, but the common people continued to rely on these local healers. The conversion of pagans continued for several centuries, but many pagans continued in their own ways and avoid the wrath of the Church by incorporating Christ as one of their gods. Though several of the saints were sainted for their destruction of the pagan’s sacred groves and healing plants, as time passed the healing plants were tolerated and given new names, names of the saints, e.g. Saint John’s wort, and they were grown in the cloisters of the Catholic monks with their healing powers attributed to their patron saints, Mary and Christ. New Christian legends were told of the healing powers of these plants. The celebrated festivals of the Celts were also transformed. The celebration of the spring equinox became Easter and the winter equinox Christmas. The cycle of the day, morning, noon, evening and midnight, and the cycle of the four seasons, so important to the forest people, became the four spokes of the wheel of the cross. The healing chants were retold with new Christian lyrics. Thus the church conformed to the beliefs of the common folks. The Benedictine Nun Hildegard of Bingen, born in 1098, documented the healing powers of the herbs, and her book is again in vogue today.

Soon after the birth of Hildegard the crusades to the Holy Land ended with the conquest of Jerusalem. Contact with the Arab-Islamic world then grew and with this influence the use of mineral remedies and their ways of alchemy brought new ways of processing medicinal plants. Arabic scholars and writers became esteemed, which led to the birth of the medical school at Salerno. New laws served to protect patients from incompetent practitioners with the burning of witches and heretics. With the “Little Ice Age” from 1350 to 1800 crops failed and the famine brought about social unrest. A plague of convulsions, respiratory and circulatory disorders with fingers and toes turning black in rot spread, a disease eventually attributed to the ergot fungus found in rye. This Black Death wiped out a third of Europe’s population. Then in 1492 Columbus returned from the New World, bringing with him syphilis. Eventually an ointment of mercury was found to be effective in treating a wide range of illnesses in spite of its severe side effects.

Then with the coming of the 18th century only that which could be scientifically proven was considered real, yet in looking at the current vocabulary used in chemistry and medicine, the post-crusades Arabic influence in these fields is most evident.

Healers, both men and women, were most at home in the midst of nature. They knew personally and felt great love for the animals they encountered and the native landscape. The medical profession has until recently been almost exclusively men that lacked this heartfelt connection to nature. Their knowledge is based on words and laboratories and less on inspiration. In the traditional agricultural society the healing essence of the feminine was more than caring for the sick. Women were herbalists and mothers, responsible for food and drink, for clothes with spinning, weaving and sewing, and the keepers of the fire. Shepherds and blacksmiths were also known to have a special power of healing. The shepherds learned from their solitude with their herd the healing powers found in nature, and the blacksmith’s magical heat was believed to banish disease and the devil. Midwives stood by women in childbirth, a sacred status, though from the 16th century

they became persecuted as witches. Among the forest people women were sorceresses or shrews, weather witches, leach women, the leaders of the sacrifice rituals, soothsayers, charm singers, and clairvoyants, all ways that demonstrated their mysterious magic. They brewed, made and used healing ales made with a long list of medicinal herbs, breads, salves and oils, soaps, salt, compresses and poultices, along with honey, vinegar, mud and urine in their treatment of illness and the wounds of accidents. Women were the essence of the healing profession.

Andrew Weil, M.D., a professor of medicine at the University of Arizona, has said “If people would be taught about healing plants, they could treat sixty percent of their diseases and ailments by themselves – which would incidentally also be a great relief to the health care budget,” (p. 286). Storl’s book ends with the enlightened sentence, “That which has been handed down to us through the tradition of folk medicine is not only worthy lore but also an art that requires intuition and spiritual vision – and it is our inheritance,” (p. 290).

For me the most important message in this history of healing is not just the role of medicinal plants and their healing properties but their place in the broader spiritual practices of the people. The hunter-gatherers began this historic journey with a sense of oneness with nature and their observations of the relationships that other species had and have with the plants. Then over the centuries the role of meditation and other altered states of consciousness has brought the healers into a special relationship with the herbs, adding much to the understanding of their effectiveness. As an instructor of ecstatic trance I have learned so much from my spirit guides such that I cannot consider myself superior to these guides but feel at one with them, the majestic buffalo, the strong and nurturing bear, the challenging coyote, down to the timidity of the mouse, and the social nature of the honey bee. Similarly, when I find spirit guides among the healing flora of the Earth I learn much from them, valuing them as partners in these spiritual relationships, e.g. the protective and cleansing umbrella of the smoke of sage, the challenging astringency of the trickster witch hazel that blooms during the winter, and Artemisia that brings alive the visions of dreams.

This book places in a new much broader context the role of medicinal herbs in healing.

Stewart says

In many places a revelation, this book is a survey. There are a few misattributed quotes (everyone makes mistakes) but some very interesting anecdotes. For me this is mostly preaching to the choir. The banning of medicine practiced with herbs, by illiterate people, and by women is a fascinating shift from decentralized medicine managed largely by women to them being forced out by law: they used herbs and were usually not allowed to read. The Church itself officially opposed herbalism and even medicine (!) because illness was punishment for sin and we should be taught how to suffer and NOT be healed. Goodness. The Church had a monstrous effect on healing through history. The best herbs (like stinging nettles) were proof of witchcraft!

Lili Trenkova says

Fantastic collection of accounts on European folk medicine before Europeans decided to colonize and decimate the rest of the world.

Ian yarington says

I received this book in the giveaways and was fairly surprised at how well researched and thorough this book was. It's actually really well put together and follows a history of beliefs, practices, and histories of people as well as their medicines. Pleasantly surprised and happy with this book.

Jacob says

I received a free copy of this book through Goodreads Giveaways.

Wolf Strohl's *The Untold History of Healing* is a fascinating introductory text to the usages of plants in healing from the Stone Age to the Enlightenment. Very helpful in offering contextualization for beliefs or practices seen in the fictional works Neil Gaiman or Terry Pratchett.

The sub title claims to cover until the present, but this is not readily apparent in the text. When Strohl brings things to the present is when the book suffers the most. A particular example is in the introduction, where a sentence suggests vaccines are harmful to children.

I had several irritations with the book. First, the writer frequently used the word phytotherapy without an offered definition. Strohl has both in text citations and footnotes. He also creates acronyms uses them once or twice and then never revisits them.

Jamie says

Big thanks to Goodreads for this giveaway! Let's get that out of the way.

So, the one thing you can't say about this book is that it isn't well researched. 290 pages and packed full of information, not to mention the extra 17 pages of notes and an extensive bibliography. Of equal importance for me, is that it's easy to read. It doesn't read like a textbook, thankfully; though I will say that at times it seems a bit like a college paper. Part of the reason, is that the author occasionally speaks to the audience. That's not necessarily a bad thing, just something that stood out to me.

Definitely, this book is steeped in history, as the title suggests. There does appear to be a definite overriding opinion that the old ways were better. It's not that I'm opposed to there being an opinion, but if you're going to call it a history... On the other hand, I really did like a quote from physician Andrew Weil that if people were taught about healing plants, they would be able to take care of many illnesses by themselves, reducing the burden on the healthcare industry. That sentiment could have been a good thesis for this book had the author chosen to run with it.

Either way, this is still a good book if you have any interest in the way medicine used to be, from the Stone Age on up to today (more or less). So go pick your herbs under the new moon and start reading.

Pibble says

The book was a bit thick in places but this book was full of the fascinating history of how language, location and lore came together to shape the healing traditions in Europe and North America.

Tr?n Tu? says

M?t quy?n sách t?t ?? tìm hi?u v? nhân h?c y t?. Storl phát hi?n r?ng n?n y t? hi?n ??i c?a ph??ng t?y c?ng u?n g?c t? nh?ng c?ng ??ng s?n b?n, du m?c h?n là n?n y h?c mang tính hi?n ??i ???c ?ào t?o bài b?n. Tác gi? là m?t nh?nh h?c v? cây thu?c b?n ??a, phát tri?n m? hình nh?nh v??n t? c?p gia ?ình trong nh?ng kh?ng gian ?ô th? hi?n ??i và m?t s? v?n ?? tôn gi?o.
